

Michigan Chapter of the National Children's Alliance

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Mr. Chairman and Committee members, I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. My name is Tom Knapp and I am the Executive Director of the Michigan Chapter of the National Children's Alliance. Beside me is Yvonne Cameron, who serves as the Director of Intervention services at Care House Children's Advocacy Center in Oakland County. We are here today on behalf of the 40 children's advocacy centers in the state of Michigan, to express our support of Senate Bill 1021, which amends the Child Protection Law to include Children's Advocacy Centers among the other agencies who currently share information during the investigation of child abuse cases in Michigan.

The Michigan Chapter of the National Children's Alliance provides training, technical assistance, accreditation services, and oversight for the 40 Children's Advocacy Centers in Michigan. We also provide development services for communities that are developing the Children's Advocacy Center model in currently unserved areas of Michigan. Last year alone Michigan's Children's Advocacy Centers provided evidence based investigative, intervention, and medical services to 9,250 children who had suffered sexual or physical abuse. In addition, Children's Advocacy centers provided 152,345 children and non-offending family members with abuse prevention and other services.

SB 1021 is important to the Michigan Chapter of the National Children's Alliance and all CACs in Michigan because at its core, the CAC model is about teamwork – bringing the agency professionals together on the front end – and about putting the needs of child victims first. These agency professionals, which include Children's Advocacy Center Staff, Law Enforcement, Children's Protective Services, Medical personnel, Mental Health professionals and others, share information to ensure that children do not have to relive the traumatic events that happened to them by telling the story multiple times to multiple professionals. The CAC model also provides for centralized coordinated evidence based services to ease the burden on child victims and their caretakers. Information sharing between all these professionals is crucial to meet the needs of the children we serve.

The Michigan Chapter of the National Children's Alliance has worked with the Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) on this bill as they are key stakeholders in the work of Children's Advocacy Centers. The MDHHS staff are involved in the information sharing that is critical for these evidence based services. It is my understanding that the Department of Health and Human Services supports the bill as now written and has submitted a card of support. This bill passed unanimously out of the Senate and I hope we can earn this same level of support here.

Yvonne would like to take a moment to share with you why this is important to the CAC for which she works and then we would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Our children are Michigan's most valuable resource. We are tasked with the responsibility of providing them with a support system that enables them to grow, learn, and thrive, and Michigan has taken enormous steps to protect our most vulnerable population. In the past two decades, high profile sexual abuse cases involving children have resulted in intense media coverage and greater awareness of the nature and scope of sexual abuse, a problem which the American Medical Association has aptly described as "a silent, violent epidemic." The Ms. Foundation for Women has called child sexual abuse "one of the most pressing issues of our times." Although tragic, this crisis has resulted in significant research, change and growth in the child sexual abuse field. In 1991, in response to federal mandates, the Governor's Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect was created in an effort to respond to the challenges involved with the handling of child sexual and physical abuse cases in the State of Michigan. One of the cornerstone recommendations of the Governor's Task Force was the 1993 development of a standardized protocol for the handling of child abuse and neglect cases in Michigan.

This innovative model recognized that in order for the State of Michigan to effectively respond to this issue that a unique public-private partnership would be essential, and that the various agencies and departments responsible for the investigation and protection of children must be united in a collaborative, multidisciplinary team effort.

This approach, which calls for a coordinated response from prosecution, law enforcement, the Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Advocacy Centers, as well as medical and mental health professionals has been widely adopted as a best practice in responding to child sexual abuse in the United States. Across the country, there are now more than 950 Children's Advocacy Centers which serve more than 300,000 children annually, and the multidisciplinary team model has now been implemented in more than 25 countries throughout the world.

In 1998, the Child Protection Law was amended to require each county to implement a standard child abuse and neglect investigation and interview protocol using as a model the protocols developed by the Task Force. The State of Michigan is the home of one of the country's largest child advocacy center families as well as a forensic interview protocol, developed by Dr. Debra Poole and the Governor's Task Force on Children's Justice, which has been implemented in nearly half of the United States as well as the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI. But as it stands, there is a slight disconnect behind what the Governor's Task Force and researchers across the United States have found to be best practice, and Michigan's Child Protection Law as it currently reads. The current Child Protection Law allows for information sharing between the Department of Health and Human Services and a wealth of other agencies, including, but not limited to law enforcement, medical personnel, the courts, research organizations, attorneys, foster agencies, child fatality review teams, citizen review teams and even the perpetrator, but Children's Advocacy Centers are nowhere to be found.

There are approximately 40 Children's Advocacy Centers in the State of Michigan, and they play critical roles in the investigation of child sexual abuse. Children's Advocacy Centers provide a child friendly, developmentally appropriate, neutral environment where forensic interviews and non-offending caregiver services are provided in collaboration with the multidisciplinary team. And the multidisciplinary team approach extends beyond joint investigations and interagency coordination. Team investigations require the

full participation and collaboration of team members, including child advocacy staff, who share their knowledge, skills, and abilities at regularly held case reviews. Team members remain responsible for not only their own roles but through this coordinated meeting, hold each other accountable and reduce duplication of efforts. Case Review is essential to the proper functioning of all Children's

Advocacy Centers and play a critical part in ensuring the best services to child victims of abuse throughout the investigative process. Case Review is also a requirement of National Children's Alliance Accreditation Standards, a level of membership mandatory for centers to be eligible for State and Federal funding. Michigan law does not expressly address Case Review, and it only references Children's Advocacy Centers in passing when addressing funding.

While many argue that disclosure to CACs falls under one or more exceptions to the confidentiality and information sharing requirements, Michigan law does not expressly authorize information sharing with CACs, and does not provide express protection for information sharing with CACs. So, a prosecutor could reasonably determine that participation in case review is a violation of Michigan law, thus negating any progress the State of Michigan has made in coordinating child abuse response efforts based on best practice. We hope that Senate Bill 1021 eliminates any ambiguity in the law and allows, when appropriate, for open information sharing between the agencies tasked by their county prosecutors and part of the multidisciplinary team response.

I think it's fair to say that we all respect and acknowledge the fact that no single agency, individual or discipline has all of the necessary knowledge, skills or resources to alone serve the needs of abused children. Therefore, the Michigan Chapter of the National Children's Alliance asks you to join us in supporting Senate Bill 1021 so that we can do our part to help improve the response to child sexual abuse in Michigan.